

The University of Chicago

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN SHAKESPEARE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF
THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE

1935

By
LLOYD CLINE SEARS

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PREFACE

The tendency in recent years to connect the art and thought of Shakespeare more exactly with his time is leading to a constantly clearer understanding of his work. In this movement many have felt a definite need for a study that will relate his moral philosophy to the changing thought of his Renaissance background. It is toward this need that I have hoped to make some contribution. I realize fully the limitations of the study, but I trust that the mass of background material which it contains will be enlightening and that it may lead to further research.

It is impossible to express adequately my appreciation for the guidance and help received throughout this study from the late Dr. Charles Read Baskervill. His profound scholarship and his kindly interest were truly a source of inspiration. I am equally grateful to Miss Evelyn May Albright, whose wide acquaintance with Renaissance thinking and whose valuable criticisms and suggestions have helped me to avoid many of the pitfalls incident to research in philosophic thought. To Dr. Stephen Chak Tornay of the department of philosophy I am also deeply grateful for guidance through the mazes of Greek, Roman, and Scholastic thought, and through the uncharted chaos of Renaissance philosophy.

Lloyd Cline Sears



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"THIS HARSH WORLD": HAMLET AND PESSIMISM

I

THE PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND

The fundamental difference between optimistic and pessimistic philosophies has always sprung from the problem of evil in the world. That Shakespeare was keenly interested in the philosophies of his time and was aware of the significance of the problem of evil is becoming increasingly evident to those who study his later plays in the light of his philosophical background. In *Hamlet* the clash of two world-views raises a profound but unanswered question. In *Troilus and Cressida* the dramatist gives a most penetrating analysis of moral values and universal law; in *Measure for Measure* he weighs the problem of human and divine justice, and in *King Lear* the justice of the universe. In *Macbeth* he studies man in relation to the world of "metaphysical" evil.

Interesting attempts are being made to reconstruct the philosophical patterns behind Shakespeare's work, and some valuable studies have been made of the problem of evil in *Macbeth*. But so far no study in general has attempted to analyze the problem systematically and to relate the material of other plays to the background of Shakespeare's thought. It is not to be supposed for a moment, of course, that Shakespeare wrote plays for the sake of a philosophical problem. On the contrary, he was above all things a consummate dramatic artist, and such philosophy as is interwoven with the action of his plays is always secondary to the exigencies of his art.

Neither is it hoped by any amount of study to arrive with certainty at Shakespeare's personal views on the problem of evil. It is doubtful, from a study of the conflicting philosophies lying behind the various plays, whether Shakespeare himself had arrived at a systematic moral philosophy; but even so, it would be a hopeless effort to decide from the mazes of his objective art, what ideas are distinctively his own. But to reconstruct in some measure his philosophical background, and to relate this to the basic ideas in the plays, should throw some new and interesting light upon various problems of interpretation.

It need not be supposed that Shakespeare was widely read in the philosophy of his time, although it is fairly certain that he was acquainted with a number of the leaders of humanistic thought, including Montaigne, Justus Lipsius, and Giordano Bruno. But

the general patterns of moral philosophy, both ancient and medieval, had in Renaissance times become so widely disseminated through all avenues of thought—poetry, drama, sermons, proverbs, and moral treatises—that they were a common heritage. Aristotle had come down through the schoolmen and, as modified by Aquinas and others, furnished the basic philosophy of the Catholic Church. Neo-Platonism had descended not only through Augustine, to whom the reformers had turned for spiritual inspiration, but even more directly from Plotinus, Proclus, Boethius, and Dionysius, through the great neo-Platonic revival in Italy. Though Stoicism had interwoven itself in a most confusing fashion with Christian and neo-Platonic thought, it had been preserved also in Cicero, Seneca, and Virgil.

But it is needless here to trace the avenues of philosophic thought to Shakespeare's time. It is sufficient to say that no period had been so keenly alert to every phase of human learning, and that out of the multiplex systems of moral philosophy, ancient and medieval, Grecian, Jewish, and Oriental, the Renaissance was glean- ing its treasures, often strangely confused and chaotic, but casting their patterns of light and shade over the art and the reflective thinking of the age.

In this background of philosophy, which, since Plato, had become dominantly moral and practical, the problem of evil was of peculiar interest. It was felt to be basic in one's understanding of the world, and it determined the world-view of each philosophic system. For from the point of view of philosophy the term *evil* included the whole range of the harmful, unpleasant, ugly, or discordant. Aristotle had distinguished between Good and Evil by the qualities which lead to the selection of an object, or aversion from it: "On the one hand are 'the beautiful,' 'the expedient,' and 'the pleasurable'; one the other hand, and opposed to these, are 'the ugly,' 'the hurtful,' and 'the painful.'"¹ Philosophically there was no essential difference between a toothache and a murder. Both belonged to the painful, or the hurtful, and both demanded explanation in a world intelligently planned.

Not until Leibnitz do we find an elaborate classification of the aspects of evil, but pre-Renaissance philosophy was cognizant

¹ W. M. Hatch, *The Moral Philosophy of Aristotle, consisting of a translation of the Nichomachean Ethics and of the Paraphrase attributed to Andronicus of Rhodes* (London: John Murray, 1879) pp. 82-83.

of differences. Earlier Greek philosophy, as well as the monistic system of Plotinus, had attempted metaphysical explanations. Metaphysically, they held, suffering and frustration in the universe arose inevitably from the mere finiteness of things, limitation viewed against a background of the limitless. Because the world is finite, there arises the tormenting thirst for the infinite, and the individual is unhappy because he is an individual and not the whole. The world itself is evil merely because it is finite, subject to change and decay.

The aspects of physical and moral evil grew out of the metaphysical. Physical evil was the suffering produced by the cosmic friction. The mutability and flux of things, the discordant and opposing forces in the universe, caused destruction and loss; and since men were placed in a changing world, their wills and plans, even bodies and minds, were subject to the same mutation. They suffered disappointment, misfortune, disease and death, and "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Physical evil, then, included all the suffering resulting from the clash of the individual with his physical environment.

Moral evil was associated with the human will. It was thought of as an imperfection, or disease, in which the mind was divided against itself, but in which its ultimate decision possessed all the qualities of a moral act. Moral evil, however, was inextricably involved with the physical, because any decision of the will might conflict with other wills and result in suffering and loss. This accentuated the problem of evil; for what kind of world was this in which such conflict was possible? It was conceivable to imagine with the Stoics a world of perfect harmony, in which no good conflicted with another, but each was supplementary to all the rest, a whole so perfect that he who should be true to his own self could not then be false to any man. But the conception of such an ideal only emphasized the actual, and moral evil took on deeper significance as it was related to the physical.

Arising, moreover, from the consciousness of evil in a world of human conflict was the problem of universal justice. If it could be shown that in all the cosmic friction the righteous flourished and the wicked were brought low, that there was an intelligent and just apportionment of reward to merit, the explanation of evil might be simple. The mind would acquiesce in the justice and order of things. It is this aspect of evil which was so boldly presented by the

author of Job, and which indeed runs through so many of the great reflective tragedies. For the conception of evil challenged the foundations of faith in a rational world and questioned the existence of an intelligent God. The early skeptics expressed the difficulty most succinctly in their famous dilemma: If there is a God, he is either powerless to eliminate the evil of the world, or he does not desire to do so. The former conclusion would limit his power and make him less than God; the latter would make him more ignoble than men, for even men would abolish evil if they could.

It is unnecessary in this study to trace the attempts of philosophies, Oriental and European, to account for the presence of evil in an ordered world. Only certain broad basic attitudes need here be suggested, while more specific concepts will be presented later where necessary. Epicureanism, observing the problem of evil—the suffering, waste, degeneracy, and injustice—and not able to harmonize it with the providence of loving, all-powerful gods, concluded that the world came about by the accidental clash of atoms whirling through the infinite void. After centuries of ceaseless and unintelligent change it would wear out again and dissolve into nothingness. Without universal order or plan, without a divine providence, evil was merely another unintelligible accident as natural in every way as good. Thus by excluding the gods the Epicureans eliminated evil as a problem.

The skeptics, as their dilemma implies, accepted as one of their two most positive tenets the non-existence of any supernatural power. Hardly more positive was their theory of the uncertainty of all knowledge, or even of existence. To the skeptic there was no positive certainty in anything, either good or evil. All was a matter of personal opinion with no foundation in reality.

The Stoic, on the other hand, with his pantheistic interpretation of the world, accepted with implicit faith the existence of God. To him God *was* the universe, and his divine providence predetermined each least event; but with this faith he was hard put to explain the presence of evil and to harmonize suffering and justice. In his extremity he borrowed from the skeptics their tropes concerning the uncertainty of things, and with superb confidence announced that there was no evil in the universe except what might be found in the human will, in its resistance to the divine providence implanted in all natural things. All suffering and human conflict was merely the natural result of change, and therefore neither

good nor evil. To hold faith in the gods they denied the existence of evil.

These great systems of thought are typical of many later philosophical attitudes. The existence of evil forced Plutarch, the Zoroastrians, and the later Manichæans to accept a duality of primal spirits—beneficent and malignant. Plotinus championed a monistic interpretation of the world and labors hard but unsuccessfully to deny the existence of evil except as a metaphysical necessity resulting from the imperfection of matter. With St. Augustine Christian thought became fused with neo-Platonic philosophy. To Augustine the basis of evil was metaphysical, consisting in the fact that the creation arose from nothingness and tends to slip back into nothingness again. With the exception of Pelagius both Christian and neo-Platonic thought associated evil with matter, and as a result the medieval mind became obsessed with the utter depravity of the flesh and of the material world. The classic of the Middle Ages in epitomizing this pious disgust and hatred of the world was *De contemptu mundi, sive De miseria conditionis humanæ* of the young Giovanni Lothario de Conti, afterward Innocent III. This famous little book is extant in an English translation by H. Kerton as early as 1576 under the title *The Mirror of mans lyfe*, and its somber echoes were heard from more than one pulpit.

The gloomy world-view of the Middle Ages was relieved slightly by the rise of Scholasticism with its revival of Aristotle. By championing the goodness of all Being, the absolute freedom of the will, and the supremacy of Eternal Law, out of which grew Reason and Natural Law, St. Thomas Aquinas prepared the way for the Humanists with their ideal of the perfectibility of man. Others like Duns Scotus and William Ockham, by taking issue with Aquinas's doctrine of Reason and Natural Law and by placing all concepts of moral good and evil in the divine will, or the divine fiat, unintentionally laid the foundation for the growth of skepticism. For, argued the skeptical, if reason is of no value in determining good and evil, if there is no certainty in the report of our senses, how can we be certain of any values? How can we know that God has willed or even exists?

In the brilliant awakening of the Renaissance with its insatiable thirst for knowledge, the growth of skepticism brought penetrating doubts and questionings. Through the maze and conflict of ideas, however, two broad outlines of reflective thought, two world-views,

seem to struggle for supremacy. The optimistic faith of the Humanists in the perfectibility of man, the freedom of the will, the glory of the present, is in contrast with a revived pessimism of the Middle Ages. Glowing through the Humanistic thought is the superb faith of Stoicism, the influence of Aquinas, and the fine idealism of the Platonists. Darkening the pessimistic gloom are the various philosophies of disillusionment from the Pyrrhonists' keen skepticism, the Cynics' bitter hate, the Platonists' disgust at the world, through Plutarch, Pliny, Innocent III, to the deepening cloud of Calvinism with its revival of the darker aspects of Augustinism.

II

THE CLASH OF TWO WORLD-VIEWS

Hamlet may truly be said to mark the beginning of Shakespeare's reflective study of the problem of evil. In his earlier plays, to be sure, a sense of evil strikes discord into the harmony of things, but usually with staccato notes, sharp, clear, but immediately silent, or with plaintive minors without depth and harshness. At the news of Gloucester's murder in *Richard III* Queen Elizabeth exclaims, "All-seeing Heaven, what a world is this!"¹ The honest Falconbridge, as he finds the body of the lovely child Arthur, is dismayed at the sudden revelation of the wickedness of the world and the uncertainty of life:

I am amazed, methinks: and lose my way
Among the thorns and dangers of this world.²

In striking contrast with this honest emotion and the violent grief of Constance, the young Dauphin cries, in the sentimental tone of a dilettante in human sorrow:

There's nothing in this world can make me joy:
Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale
Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man;
And bitter shame hath spoiled the sweet world's taste,
That it yield's nought but shame and bitterness.³

In one of the finest passages before *Hamlet* which picture the evils of the world, we find this same note of shallowness and insincerity. The dethroned Richard II entertains himself in prison by turning his cell into an imaginary world, peopled with discontented thoughts at strife with one another and themselves.

¹ *Richard III*, II, i, 82.

² *King John*, IV, iii, 140-141.

³ *Ibid.*, III, iv, 107-111.

Thus play I in one person many people,
 And none contented: sometimes am I king;
 Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
 And so I am: then crushing penury
 Persuades me I was better when a king;
 Then I am king'd again: and by and by
 Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
 And straight am nothing: but whate'er I be,
 Nor I nor any man that but man is
 With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
 With being nothing.¹

The passage is a penetrating analysis of one phase of "this all-hating world," the eternal frustration of human desire. Ambitions are thwarted by physical impossibilities, the joy of power defeated by treasons, lowliness made miserable by penury, and even divinest hopes nullified by fears and doubts. It is the inevitable penalty of finitude, the price of being, that must be paid by "any man that but man is," and from which there is no relief except "with being nothing." The curse of finite being is that will ever exceeds the power. The profundity of the truth underlying the passage is not destroyed, but even accentuated, by the childish fancy of the King, who seems only to skim the surface of his thought, unaware of the depths beneath. For him, and indeed in all the plays before *Hamlet*, the sense of evil is attached concretely to individual things, his overthrow by Bolingbroke, his desire to escape his prison, his fear of poverty; but in *Hamlet* the sense of evil, growing out of concrete suffering, rises above it into pure philosophic reflection.

To arrive at the point of view which *Hamlet* assumes toward the problem of evil, we need first to understand the optimistic philosophy which it so profoundly questions. St. Augustine had acclaimed the dignity of man before the fall and the possibility of his future glory. Man was not made as a stone, which has only being, nor even like animals, which have growth and feeling, but man possesses Reason by which he may know God. He is little inferior to angels because of the glory to which he can attain; he is the Son of God, and may become "haylefellow" with the angels. Yet is this dignity not because of his worth, but through the pure grace of God.²

With the coming of the Renaissance, however, the new and intense interest in pagan philosophies, which were untroubled by

¹*Richard II*, V, v, 31-41.

²St Augustine, *Certain select Prayers gathered out of St. Augustines Meditations* (3d ed.; London: John Daye, 1577), Sig. C., fol. 7.

the theological abstractions of faith and grace, turned the attention of thinkers more and more away from the absolutism of God to the dignity of man and the possibilities of human perfection. Man's place as the center of the universe gains prominence even over his fall. La Primaudaye writes:

When I direct my flight...vnto the heauens, and with the wings of contemplation behold their wonderfull greatness, their terrible motions ...the liuely brightness, rare beautie, and incomparable force of the sun and moone...the infinite number of goodlie stars....and from this excellent and constant order of all these things, as one rauished and amased, when I withdraw my spirite lower into the elementarie region, to admire and wonder at the spreading of the earth amidst the waters...when I admire the diuersitie of times and seasons, the continual spring of fountains, the certaine course of riuers and generally, so maine wonderful works vnder the cope of heauen, I cannot maruell enough at the excellencie of Man for whome all things were created....¹

La Primaudaye condemns Pliny, Homer, Theocritus, and others for their pessimistic view of the imbecility and miseries of man, but at the same time he believes the Stoics overstated his excellence because they ascribed to him *natural* graces which, by the quickness of his own understanding, might bring him to perfection. To La Primaudaye the grace of God was also necessary; but, this once granted, then "by philosophie we are taught that perfection, which concerneth all the actions and dealings of man...."²

Giovanni Battista Gelli attributes the glory and excellence of man to his perfect freedom of will and to his reason. His reason, which is divine, permits him to know his own excellence and exalts him above all other creatures, even the incorruptible heavens; for though the heavens are glorious and the sun out of his "inexhaustible Storehouse gives light to all the rest of the celestial Luminaries," yet he knows not his own excellence and use. Man, however, by means of his God-like reason and the freedom of his will, may attain to perfection:

If he lift up his face toward the Heavens from whence he came, and like an inquisitive Philosopher considers the Beauty of the celestial Bodies, the wonderful harmony of Nature, the agreeable vicissitudes of Seasons, and the like, he will soon change himself from a terrestrial to a heavenly Creature, and if despising all the allurements and obstacles he

¹ Peter La Primaudaye, *The French Academie*, trans. T. B(owes), (London: Edmund Bollifant, 1586), pp. 10-11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43; pp. 14-17.

finds from his body, he seriously applies his thoughts to the contemplation of divine Things, he shall almost make himself a God.¹

Gelli is too much a Platonist to believe that this absolute perfection can be fully attained until the soul is free from the encumbrance of the flesh, but it is, nevertheless, within the power of any man to attain ultimately "a perfection that is hardly to be imagined."² This new hymn to the dignity and perfection of Man, so different in its exultant optimism from the gloom of original sin and predestination, rose triumphantly and filled the Renaissance mind with visions of undreamed-of achievement. Man, the microcosm, or "little world," contained within himself all the perfection of the universe, even that of a minor god;

Man is the little world, (so we him call).
The world the little god, God the Great All.³

But among all those to catch the new strain no one sang with bolder, clearer tone than Marlowe. In Faustus, though human effort is conventionally misguided and comes to naught, we have the longing to carry achievement to the utmost limits of the mind of man, and by tiring the brain to "get a deity"; and when Faustus is struck with admiration at the glory of the heavens, even Mephistopheles bears witness to the greater dignity of man:

But think'st thou heaven is such a glorious thing?
I tell thee, Faustus, it is not half so fair
As thou, or any man that breathes on earth.⁴

It is *Tamburlaine*, however, inadequate as it is in grasping the problem of evil and unmoral in its attitude toward cruelty and wrong, that gives us Marlowe's finest philosophy of human greatness. Coming up from the sheepfolds, the young brigand thinks it the part of men to affect "thoughts coequal with the clouds." With his divine ambition, he feels himself an equal of the gods. It is within his power, inspired by love and beauty, to achieve perfection. For Jove himself once masked in shepherd's weeds,

And by those steps that he hath scal'd the heavens,
May we become immortal like the gods.⁵

¹Giovanni Battista Gelli, *Circe*, trans. Thomas Brown, (London, 1702), p. 289. An earlier English translation of this popular work appeared in 1557, with a second edition in 1558-9.

²*Ibid.*, p. 294.

³T. Bastard, "De Microcosmo," in *Select Poetry*, ed. Edward Farr for the Parker Society (Cambridge: University Press, 1845), II, 306.

⁴*Doctor Faustus*, II, ii, 5-8.

⁵*Tamburlaine*, I, ii, 199 f.

How many of the Humanists may have shared this extreme philosophy of human greatness, which Marlowe himself could not satisfactorily reconcile with the mystery of death and the fact of inhumanity and cruelty, it would be impossible to say. But the significant fact is the tendency in all this new philosophy to exalt the natural virtues, the dignity of man, and the supreme value and possibilities of human life.

Against this bright optimism the reaction of *Hamlet* comes with an impression of bitter disillusionment, like an awakening from idealistic dreams to some hideous reality. The play as a whole contains the elements of both optimism and pessimism, for Hamlet's awakened doubts and cynicism are silhouetted against the brighter background of humanistic idealism. Hamlet has been trained in the philosophy of the time. To him the world had seemed a goodly frame, the brave o'er-hanging firmament a majestical roof fretted with golden fire, and man the perfection of creation. None of the eulogies of men surpasses the admiration of Hamlet:

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!¹

The young prince has himself followed the ideals of his philosophy; he is the courtier, soldier, scholar, "eye, tongue, sword,"

The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observ'd of all observers . . .²

He is an ardent lover, a dutiful and loving son, a frank and sincere friend. For him the world has had no thorns, and his philosophy of optimism was the natural and normal thing. But when the play begins, a radical change has already started in the thinking of the Prince, which is to deepen by degrees from mere violent grief, through cynicism and doubt, to a settled faith in the futility of life and a hatred of the world.

Just at present we need not be so much concerned about the psychological causes of this change. They have been well attributed by Professor Bradley³ to emotional shock, and similarly by Miss

¹ *Hamlet*, II, ii, 315-320.

² *Ibid.*, III, i, 161 f.

³ Andrew Cecil Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy, Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. (2d ed.; New York: Macmillan Co., 1914).

Campbell⁴ to violent grief. That this was the origin and commencement there can be no doubt. Hamlet had to learn the other side of life, or shall we say, life as a whole? He had to experience the evil, as well as the good. But the consciousness of evil grows inevitably out of pain. It was without doubt the sudden and untimely death of Hamlet's father, breaking his idealistic concept of human worth with an acute and vivid sense of the frailty of life, that set in order his whole train of thinking. It was no doubt also the immediate infidelity of his mother which shattered his faith in the purity of love and revealed to him the hollowness of vows and the strength of fleshly appetite. Out of this consciousness of evil known grew suspicions he could not stifle of worse things yet unseen, and hard upon this came the revelation of his uncle's guilt, confirming his inmost fears and opening to the vision of his tortured soul the bewildering depths of human depravity. And added to all the rest he must bear the unexplained desertion of the only being in whom he yet had faith and whose love might still have lightened the gloom.

Yet it was not so much the sudden loss but the manner of the loss that increased a hundred fold the intensity of his pain: his father murdered, and by a brother's hand, a deed that bore the "primal eldest curse"; a mother idealized in his father's love, turning to incest and beastly lust with the murderer of her husband while harboring, as he supposed, the guilty knowledge of his crime. So Hamlet stood alone, forsaken or separated from those he loved by a dark abyss of crime bitterer than the separation of death.

It is a repetition of the age-old tragedy of Job, but with a difference; for here is far greater tragic intensity—no mere physical suffering or loss of material things, but the anguish of a sensitive soul and a loss involving all the realm of moral evil. It is different also in that Hamlet possesses little of the patience and humility of his fellow-sufferer, and that centuries of earnest question and answer divide their points of view. But fundamentally the situations are alike, for we have in each a soul in pain seeking to solve the riddle of the painful earth.

But we are not here concerned with Hamlet's suffering, no matter how intense and maddening it may have been. To trace its influence upon his character and course of action belongs to the

⁴Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes Slaves of Passion*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1930).

province of psychology and dramatic technique. For philosophy suffering is but a symptom, and the thing of moment is the cause behind it. Our interest, then, lies in the reaction of Hamlet's mind, the conscious reflection caused by pain, his effort to arrive at a concept of the world in harmony with the fact of suffering and sin. At the same time, alongside Hamlet's own philosophy are the other elements of the play, reinforcing, emphasizing, illuminating his thought by contrast or example.

His first and immediate reaction, then, to the problem of evil is a sweeping change from an optimistic to a pessimistic view of the world. The light went out and left the world in darkness. It is the natural reaction of a consistent mind. Face to face with the stupendous fact of death, sudden, unmerited, desolating, and with the over-powering realization of evil, of the deepest depravity even in those whom he honored and loved, his mind could find no consistency except in pessimism. Faith in the justice of the world, the goodness of human nature, and its capacity for perfection could not be reconciled with blood-red fact that cried louder than the voice of faith. Only in a world in some way fundamentally bad could such manifest evil consist.

It is not strange, therefore, that Shakespeare represents Hamlet's mind, divided by the irreconcilable antinomy of good and evil, as seeking its logical and emotional unity in pessimism. Other minds had been driven to the same conclusion; it was the prevailing view of religious thought. From Augustine through Innocent III the tendency had grown to regard the world as hopelessly corrupt and irredeemably lost. Thomas Beard, in his *Theatre of Gods iudgements* voices the religious pessimism of his age. As one is grieved, he says, to see a garden of exquisite flowers "withered and scorched by the violence of some outraged tempest," so one is grieved at seeing the "disorders and hurliburlies" that "disfigure the face of the whole world," men not restrained by any bridle,

running fiercely into all filthinesse and mischiefe....all which evils are so common and so vsuall at this time amongst men, that the World seemeth truely to bee nothing else but an ocean full of hidious monsters, or a thicke forrest full of theeues and robbers, or some horrible wildernessee wherein the inhabitants of the earth, being sauage and vnnatural, void of sense and reason, are transformed into brute beasts....¹

¹ Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods iudgements* (London: Adam Islip, 1631), pp. 1-2. The first edition of this remarkable book appeared in 1597.

Spenser gives poetic voice to the same gloomy view. His belief that the world was growing daily worse and worse was based not only upon the prevailing corruption, but upon the cosmic shift in the planets which had thrown it so out of balance that the longer it endured the more evil it would become.¹

Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square,
From the first point of his appointed sourse,
And being once amisse grows daily worse and worse.²

Similarly old Thenot in the *Shepherd's Calendar* asks,

Must not the world wend in his commun course
From good to badd, and from badde to worse,
And from worse into that is worst of all,
And then returne to his former fall?³

Examples of this gloomy world-view could be multiplied by the scores. It is not here intended to imply that Shakespeare was influenced either by Spenser or by Beard in the pessimism that colors *Hamlet* and the following plays; it is only intended to suggest the strong current of gloom which was opposed to the optimism of the Humanists and growing constantly stronger. Indeed, the pessimism of *Hamlet*, as we shall see, has quite a different flavor from this pious and religious doom of a wicked world. It is far more basic, penetrating, questioning. But after all is said, pessimism of whatever brand or degree is intrinsically related and has fundamentally the same origin—an emotional or logical reaction to the phenomenon of evil; and it relates the particular wrong to the universe as a whole. The crime or injustice becomes an essential part of the world in which it occurs.

So in *Hamlet* the consciousness of evil throws its dark shadow over the whole world. The ways of men and their customs and ideals suddenly become stale and unprofitable; the beauty in life vanishes and leaves only the hideous and the coarse.

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable;
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! O fie! 't is an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.⁴

¹Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Prologue to Book V. See also Bk. IV, Canto XVIII, st. 32.

²*Ibid.*, Stanza 1.

³Edmund Spenser, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, February, 11-13.

⁴*Hamlet*, I ii, 133-137.

This "goodly frame," the earth, becomes a "sterile promontory;" the "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" changes to a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours;" and man in his pride and glory seems nothing but a "quintessence of dust." The world has become a prison, and Denmark one of the worst confines, wards, and dungeons. The values of life have vanished, leaving in their place only a sense of its utter futility and loathsomeness, besides which the eternal sleep of death is "a consummation devoutly to be wish'd."

III

CORRUPTION MINING ALL WITHIN

When we turn to a more careful analysis of *Hamlet's* indictment of the world, we find a repetition of the age-old charges of human depravity, inhumanity and suffering, universal injustice, the vanity and worthlessness of human effort, the certainty of death and eternal oblivion, and a doubt of any compensation beyond the grave. Time-worn as these fears and questionings are, they nevertheless spring with perennial vigor and freshness in the mind of Hamlet.

This is due partly to the universal and fundamental interest in the problems involved, which demand some solution in every thinking mind, but perhaps even more to the technique of the play. In the first place, the mind of Hamlet is not the dispassionate and imperturbable mind of the Stoic, who takes the rewards and buffets of fortune with equal thanks, nor has it been dulled with long community with the world; but on the contrary it is alert, penetrating, piercing through the surface of custom and convention to the truth of things, and revealing the truth in all its gruesomeness with an intensity of passion and a bitter cynicism that carries conviction. In the second place, except for brief intervals, all attention is centered upon him; he holds the spotlight from first to the last; his thinking dominates the play. Around him move the currents of ordinary life, feasting and drinking, affairs of state and war, intrigue, the hollow vanity of the court. These serve as background for his thought. Through and through the body of the world his intellect flashes, laying bare its sordidness and sham, its corruption and vanity, but Hamlet walks alone and apart. He is at odds with life because it is earth-centered and belongs to time, while he is bound to death and belongs to eternity. He is like a questioning spirit from another world weighing the worth of this and finding it but vanity.

The first element in this vanity of life is the corruption hidden beneath its surface and mining all within. Outwardly the face of things is smooth; the court adjusts itself to the change of kings and moves forward in its customary way. There is a momentary observance of "obsequious sorrow," but it is only superficial show, "With one Auspicious and one Drooping eye." It is a part of the "uses of this world," and Hamlet is stung to the quick with its hypocrisy. The uncle becomes the loving, kindly father, seeking with smiles to win the favor of his son; the Queen becomes the twice-solicitous mother; and life again is filled with gaiety and laughter. But it is the nature of corruption that it works below the surface, and Hamlet learns that in Denmark a villain may smile and smile, and underneath the smiles hide murder, and that even religion itself is but a cloak for vice. As Polonius expresses it in a momentary flash of self-searching,

with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.²

The depravity of his mother was most difficult to understand. He could find no excuse for her unnatural revolt except an impulse born in hell. Outwardly her loyalty to the king was firm, for

she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed upon.³

But inwardly her seeming-virtuous will was corrupt beneath the level of the beast "that wants discourse of reason." Hamlet tried in vain to fathom the causes of her change. No one with eyes and natural sense could so have erred; it could not have been love, for at her age the hey-day in the blood was tame and waited upon judgment.

Sense, sure, you have,
Else could you not have motion; but sure, that sense
Is apoplex'd for madness would not err,
Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrall'd,
But it reserv'd some quantity of choice,
To serve in such a difference. What devil was 't
That thus hath cousen'd you at hoodman-blind?
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,

¹ *Hamlet*, I, ii, 11. First Folio reading.

² *Ibid.*, III, i, 46 ff.

³ *Ibid.*, I, ii, 143-145.

Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope.¹

It was a viciousness of nature that acted against all reason, sense, and judgment. But it was only one instance of the universal depravity of our race, where to be honest is to be one man picked out of ten thousand, and where, if every man had his desert, none would escape whipping.

Hamlet's mind recoiled at the indescribable beastliness of sensual appetite. Love was degraded to the foulness of lust, and beauty was a pander to transform honesty to a bawd. So ingrained was our evil that there was no hope of redeeming the nature of man from its corruption; for not even heaven-infused virtue could "so innoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it." The evil is in the root of our being and cannot be eradicated. The nunnery was the only sanctuary for purity, for even marriage reeked of lust and smelled of the primal hereditary sin. No more marriages should be allowed. They served only for the breeding of sinners, and why should corruption be propagated when even the honest were better never born? In the anguish of his soul Hamlet denounced the baseness of all human flesh:

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my back than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves all...²

In this torture scene with Ophelia it is the idealism of the old Hamlet and the intensity of his love upsurging again within his soul, suddenly confronted and shattered by the present stark negation of his mind, his loss of faith in love, his realization of Ophelia's deception, that drives him almost beyond the bounds of sanity. The old Hamlet cries, "I loved you once," but the Hamlet who has found by bitter experience that love is only lust answers back, "I never loved you." The struggle between love and cynicism, faith and negation, wrings his inmost soul and breaks out in vitriolic denunciation of human corruption and the breeding of sinners.

In his revulsion at the impurity of love and the hereditary

¹ *Hamlet*. III, iv, 71-81.

² *Ibid.*, III, ii, 122-131.

evil of man, Hamlet's tone is akin to the gloomiest note of the old religious pessimism. The Manichæans had forbidden marriage, or at least birth, because it continued the corruption of the human race. The Montanists and other heretical sects held similar views, and there was even a strong feeling in the orthodox church that it was better for men never to be born. St. Augustine cries,

I am an unhappy man, even a sorry man borne of woman, short-lived, full fraught with many miseries; even a man that is like vnto vanitie, matched with witlesse beastes, and already become like vnto them Agayne, what am I? A darke dungeon, wretched earth, a child of wrath, a vessel meete for dishonor, begotten with vncleannes, liuing in misery, and dying in distresse. . . . I am a vessell of dung, a coffin of rottonnesse, full of loathsomenesse and stinch, blind, poore, naked, subiect to exceedyng many necessities. . . . mortall, and miserable: whose dayes passe away as a shade, whose life glanceth away as a shadow by Moone light, growyng as a flower vpon a tree, and fadyng out of hand agayne, now florishing and by and by withering agayne.¹

Such complaints at the miseries of men were common in religious thought. Stephen Gosson's "*Speculum Humanum*," first printed in Kerton's *Mirror of mans lyfe*, turns into wretched verse the same philosophy:

O what is man? or whereof might he vaunt?
From earth and aire and ashes first he came
.
A drie and withered reede, that wanteth sap,
Whose rotten roote is reft even at a clap;
.
A lame and lothsome limping-legged wight,
That daily doth God's frowne and furie feel;
A crooked cripple, voide of all delight,
That haleth after him an hauling heele,
.
A wretch of wrath, a sop in sorrow sowst,
A brused brake with billows all bedowst;
A filthie cloth, a stinking clod of clay;
A sack of sinne that shall be swallowed aye.²

Fundamental in Augustine's thought, as in Gosson's, is the idea that all the miseries of man come from the fact that he is "born of woman," "begotten in uncleanness," from a "rotten roote" bringing his evils with him into the world.

¹ St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, Sig. A, III to Sig. B, i.

² Edward Farr (ed.), *op. cit.*, II, 344.

Innocent III is even more brutal in denouncing the vileness of human life.

Truelye man is made of earthe, conceyved in sinne, and born to payne. Hee doeth commit in this lyfe, wicked and shrewde turnes which bee not lawfull....Through his wicknesse hee shall become food to ye fire, meat for worms, and a lumpe of putrifaction loathsome to behold.¹

The Pope dwells again and again with disgusting coarseness upon the uncleanness of physical birth. "Man is made of dust, of clay, of ashes: he is conceived in the wanton desire of fleshly luste, in the heat of carnall appetyte, in the foul delight of leacherye, and which is worse, in the spotte of sinne."² Any fleshly tie, even of marriage, is unclean in the cardinal's immaculate theology.

For who knoweth not y^t carnal knowledge (although it be in marriage) cannot be had w^t out y^e motion of the flesh, without the heat of carnall desire, and without y^e foul delight of wanton lust. Whereby the seedes conceived are adulterate, defiled, & corrupte.³

Hamlet's mind, in its bitterness against life, has sunk almost to the level of the good Pope's; it is overwhelmed with the uncleanness of love and the whole process of life. His thought connects gruesomely the breeding of maggots in dead dogs with human conception in the woman he had loved. Men have become for him little better than miserable worms "crawling between heaven and earth."

Yet unlike the Pope's, Hamlet's thought is not so much obsessed with the foulness of sex as with the insignificance and vileness of men in their arrogance and pride. He has something of the spirit of Montaigne:

Presumption is our naturall and originall infirmitie. *Of all creatures man is the most miserable and fraile, and therewithall the proudest and disdainfullest.* Who perceiveth and seeth himselfe placed here, amidst their filth and mire of the world, fast tied and nailed to the worst, most senseless, and drooping part of the world, in the vilest corner of the house, and farthest from heavens coape, with those creatures, that are the worst of the three conditions; and yet dareth imaginarily place himselfe above the circle of the Mone, and reduce heaven under his feet.⁴

Even closer to Hamlet's thought is Montaigne's denunciation

¹ H. Kerton, trans., *The Mirror of mans lyfe* (London: Henry Bynneman, 1576), Bk. I, chap. i.

² *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. i.

³ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. iii.

⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. by John Florio 1603 (London: J. M. Dent, 1898), Bk. II, chap. xii.

of the futility of human rage. With all his ambitions and revengeful pride, man is but a mere insect on the face of the earth,

*This many-headed, divers-armed, and furiously-raging monster, is man; wretched weake and miserable man; whom if you consider well, what is he, but a crawling, and ever-moving Antsneast?*¹

Hamlet's cynicism is Montaigne's heightened by the bitterness of passion and embracing not only the insignificance but the depravity of men.

IV

THE WHIPS AND SCORNS OF TIME

Out of this basic corruption of man's nature arises the second aspect of evil, which fills the mind of Hamlet with a sense of futility. This is the injustice of men and its resultant pain. For a part of the wretchedness of the human ant is that he is filled with ambition and cross-purposes, and the clash of wills brings injustice and suffering. Again Hamlet's thinking is brought into sharp relief against the easy-going optimism of the court. Polonius gives his son a long speech of advice composed of the wisdom of the world, showing him how to advance himself and take care of his own interests. It closes with that Stoic idealism,

This above all; to thine own self be true
And it must follow, as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.²

This conception that all men have a definite place in the fixed pattern of the universe, and that each needs only to take care of his own interests and he will never encroach upon the interests of his neighbor, was a beautiful part of the Stoic philosophy. It was based upon the idea that the world was a perfect unit under the guidance of divine providence. Seneca had written,

All this world, in which all divine and humane things are inclosed, is but one: we are the members and parcells of this great bodie. Nature hath created us akin, in forming us of the same Elements, and in the same enclosure. Shee hath planted mutuall loue in our hearts, and made vs sociable. She it is that hath composed iustice and equitie....Let vs haue this Verse in our own mouthes:

I am a Man, and thinke this true to bee,
That nothing humane is estrang'd from mee,

¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. II, chap. xii.

² *Hamlet*, I, iii, 78-80.

... Human society resembleth a vault of stone, which would fall except the stones resisted one another; so that by this meanes it is sustained.¹

It was beautiful idealism, but the theory of the perfect harmony of things rang ironically against the hard facts of life. For even as Polonius spoke, the Ghost was walking. There was the revelation of a fundamental clash of interests, with more yet to follow, in which injustice should be so inextricably involved that, in order to fulfill the apparent requirements of justice, the innocent must suffer for the guilty and Hamlet fall through his uncle's guilt.

The aspects of injustice are myriad, ranging from trivial matters to the most profound interests. While this is only a minor problem in the play, Hamlet is yet keenly aware of the injustice of the world in its different forms. Against the envy of others no human goodness is proof. "If thou dost marry," he tells Ophelia, "I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny."² In the corrupted currents of this world merit goes unrewarded, while wealth and absurd pomp are licked and flattered, and young waterflies like Osric fill the courts of kings. But Hamlet with his inhuman cynicism sees through the sham of wealth and social place. "He hath much land and fertile; let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the king's mess. 'T is a chough; but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt."³ Any fool raised to office is immediately worshipped.

It is not very strange; for mine uncle is king of Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while my father liv'd, give twenty, forty, fifty, an hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little. 'S blood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out.⁴

Montaigne had attempted to explain the philosophy of it.

I was now upon this point, that we need but looke upon a man advanced to dignity; had we but three daies before knowne him to bee of little or no worth at all: an image of greatnesse, and an Idea of sufficiency, doth insensibly glide and creep into our opinions; and we persuade ourselves, that increasing in state, and credit, and followers, hee is also increased in merit. We judge of him not according to his worth; but after the maner of casting-counters, according to the prerogative of his ranke. But let fortune turne her wheels, let him again decline and come

¹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *The Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, trans. by Thomas Lodge (London: William Stansly, 1620), Epist. XCV.

² *Hamlet*, III, i, 139-141.

³ *Ibid.*, V, ii, 87-90.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, ii, 380 ff.

down amongst the vulgar multitude; every one with admiration enquireth of the cause, and how he was raised so high. Good Lord is that he? will some say.¹

While Montaigne attempts an explanation, Hamlet only broods with a sense of personal bitterness upon the fickleness of man. But painful as may be this misprizing of human worth and folly, it is perhaps trivial in comparison with other aspects of injustice, which make life intolerable and, except for the fear of the darkness after death, would drive men to self-destruction:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?²

In these lines the whole inhumanity of man to man is summarized with the intense bitterness of one who has himself suffered.

But in addition to the injustice of men there is still a deeper injustice, for man is also called upon to suffer from the forces of the universe. Not all the "whips and scorns of time" are caused by his fellow sufferers, for the keenest pain comes often from causes outside humanity itself. Sometimes those causes lie in birth, sometimes in fortune, neither of which men can control, and yet they mar and blight the entire life.

So, oft it chanches in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth—wherein they are not guilty
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By the o'er growth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason
Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausible manners, that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star—
Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo—
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault.³

¹ Montaigne, *op. cit.*, Bk. III, chap. viii.

² *Hamlet*, III, i, 70-76.

³ *Ibid.*, I, iv, 23-36.

These natural defects had been even more painfully described by Innocent III.

Hamlet attempts no explanation; he is only pointing out the irony and injustice of things.

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!²

heaven hath pleas'd it so.
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, iv, 173.

V

FOOD FOR WORMS

With his awakened consciousness of the bitter injustice of things Hamlet's mind broods henceforth on the futility of human effort in conflict with the power of circumstance and fate. Even the supreme values of life are subject to the chance of fortune and of time.

As Mr. Robertson¹ has already pointed out there is a close similarity in Hamlet's thought and that of Montaigne on the helplessness of men against fortune and destiny. Montaigne says:

My consultation doth somewhat roughly hew the matter, and by its first shew, lightly consider the same: the maine and chiefe point of the work I am wont to resign to heaven Good and bad fortune, are in my conceit two soveraigne powers. 'Tis folly to think that humane wisdom may act the full part of fortune. And vaine is his enterprise, that presumeth to embrace both causes and consequences, and lead the progress of his fact by the hand.²

Similarly Montaigne shows that fortune often improves our plans, and quotes Meander's statement that "Fortune has more judgment than we." Whether Shakespeare was here influenced by Montaigne as Mr. Robertson believes, or whether he is drawing from other sources, is not pertinent to this discussion. The idea is basically the old Stoic belief in the inevitability of fate, colored with a faint tinge of Christian providence. Against the decrees of destiny of what avail is human will? Hamlet finally surrenders even his better judgment to the direction of fate:

....we defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all.³

Fatalism is the refuge of the weakened will, the faith of helplessness. Out of a will that desires but is powerless to act, bound by nothing but the mere negation of action, grows a conviction of the futility of effort and the tendency to leave the course of things to destiny.

But the philosophy of futility reacts in turn upon the will and

¹ John M. Robertson, *Montaigne and Shakespeare and Other Essays on Cognate Questions* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909).

² Montaigne, *op. cit.*, Bk. III, chap. viii. Similar ideas occur in Bk. III chap. xii; Bk. I, chap. xi; Bk. I, chap. xxiii; Bk, chap. x; and Bk. I, chap. xlvii.

³ *Hamlet*, V, ii 230-234.

further paralyzes its power of motion. Human effort seems useless and vain, and even the values for which men strive fade into distance and twilight. Hamlet experienced with pain this changing sense of values. Conscious of the reality of evil, and the impotence and frustration of desire, he became more and more convinced, not only of the futility of effort, but of the worthlessness of possible achievement. Greatness was only food for oblivion, and for even the great man's memory to outlive his life half a year he must needs build churches. The note of bitterness against religious enthusiasm is a part of the changed point of view. Human values have been largely swallowed up in the stark negation of evil. There is nothing in life worth living for, nothing worth achieving.

This is the essence of pessimism, and on its darkened horizon the avenging of his father becomes hazy and far away. Intellectually he still clings to its importance, but emotionally he would relegate it to the limbo of forgotten things, among the futilities of life. A gulf has opened between his intellect and will, or rather, between the old Hamlet and the new, the same gulf that separates him from Laertes and the court. To Laertes the value of vengeance was supreme.

To hell, allegiance! vows to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.¹

This is a part of the "uses of the world," but Laertes does not look beneath the surfaces of things nor question customs and conventions; he is perhaps emotionally incapable of pessimism, and for that reason retains his sense of values and his power to act. Hamlet, however, has searched the heart of life and found it vanity. He is forced to spur his dull revenge, to convince himself anew of its significance. The player actor has more tears for Hecuba than he for his murdered father; he has indeed grown "muddy-mettl'd." To build again a faith in human values, he recalls the arguments of his old philosophy, which he never wholly abandons, but from which his mind has been estranged. If man's chief good is but to sleep and feed, he is a beast, no more; but surely with his "godlike

¹ *Ibid.*, IV, v, 113-118.

reason" and "large discourse," he is called to nobler achievement. He sees the imminent death of twenty thousand men over a cause not worth a straw, yet for a fantasy and trick of fame they go to their graves like beds. It is the way of the world, the "imposthume of much wealth and peace," but in the estimation of men the honor at stake has value outweighing life itself. Against this trifle his own cause seems great. He has caught for the moment the view of the world and time. But only for a moment. At his next appearance he is looking from the darkness of eternity, and beside the grave all human values vanish into nothing.

Fundamental in Hamlet's thinking, and indeed throughout the play, is the concept of Death. The story opens with the walking of the ghost and closes with a funeral. Its pages are painted with images of death, with murders and yawning churchyards and graves filled with skulls. Death follows us from scene to scene and beats persistently upon our minds. It is the mortality of things that Hamlet broods upon, the decay of love, the corruption of death, and the oblivion of the grave. He is like the voice of death pronouncing judgment upon life; for he looks beyond the vaunting greatness of the present and weighs time in the balance of eternity.

Again with consummate art Shakespeare throws Hamlet into bold relief against the background of life around him. To the court, absorbed in its daily affairs, death was a matter of little concern, a necessity of nature which no man could shun and, therefore, not to be long lamented. They held the soothing philosophy of Euphues:

Is it strange to see y^e cutte off, which by nature is made to be cut?
or melten, which is fit to be melted? or that burnt which is apt to be
burnt, or man to passe that is borne to perish?¹

This is the popular consolation drawn from Plutarch, derived by him from the harsher Stoics and softened and sentimentalized. Since fate is inevitable, says Plutarch,

Therefore it becomes men well educated to consider that those who have paid their debt to mortality have only gone before us a little time; that the longest life is but as a point in respect of eternity; and that many who have indulged their sorrow to excess have themselves followed in a small while those that they have lamented, having reaped no profit out of their complaints, but macerated themselves with voluntary afflictions.²

¹ John Lyly, *Complete Works*, 3 v., ed. Bond. (Oxford, 1902), I, 310.

² Plutarch, *Morals*. Translated from the Greek by several hands, corrected and revised by William W. Goodwin, with an introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson, (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1870), I, 331.

This is the philosophy of practical wisdom and sound good health that refuses to be bothered about the inevitable, and centers its interest not on death but life.

Hamlet, on the contrary, is obsessed with the vivid reality of death, and tortured with exquisite pain at the thought of its power over life. He is the antithesis of the Stoic. No narcotic philosophy numbs the sensitivity of his soul to the horror of this common end of man, but he examines it with microscopic minuteness, analyzes and dissects and tries to read its inmost secrets. His mother urges him to give over his sorrow,

Do not forever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust,
Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.¹

But Hamlet replies, "Ay, Madam, it is common." The contrast in point of view is painfully illuminating. To one the commonness of death dulls it with familiarity; to the other its commonness is the source of deepest pathos. To one who feels the tragedy of death it is no consolation to remember, as the King suggests, that it

is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,²

or that the common theme of nature is death of fathers; it only increases the universal horror and multiplies the pain of the particular by the infinity of the whole.

The universality of death is combined in Hamlet's thinking with its essential earthiness and its degradation of human greatness and pride. Death is the great leveler before whom beggars and kings are weighed in equal balance, by whom the high and the low are brought to a common end—the dust. When Polonius is slain, Hamlet drags "the guts" into the neighboring room, and explains to the courtiers that he has "compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin." Man at the best is only food for worms.

Your worm is your only emperor for diet; we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table: that's the end.

King. Alas, alas!

¹*Hamlet*, I, ii, 70-73.

²*Ibid.*, I, ii, 98f.

Hamlet. A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king,
and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

King. What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet. Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress
through the guts of a beggar.¹

The idea of man as food for worms, as coming from the dust and going back to dust, is universal, to be sure. It is found abundantly in the Hebrew scriptures, in some of the prayers and songs of the church, and in popular proverbs. It is found most vividly expressed in Augustine and Innocent III. Augustine cries,

What am I that speaketh w^t thee: woe is me Lord:

O Lorde spare me. I am but a rotten carcasce,

Wormes meate, a stinkyng coffin, & foode for fire.²

Innocent III, as we have already seen, would make both life and death so loathsome that the soul would hate the world and long to escape to heaven. He dwells upon the foulness of the body and the gruesomeness of decay.

But when man shall dye, his inheritance shall bee with brute beastes and serpents, for all men shall sleepe in the dust, and the wormes shall eat their flesh.... O what a lothsome parentage is that, where rottennesse is the father? and what an vncleane stocke is that, which is vnited with worms? For man is conceiued in corruption, and in the burning heate of foul luste, vpon whose dead carkasse the wormes doe wait as mourners. In his life time he bringeth forth troublesome and tedious vermyne, & after death his fleshe engendreth wormes; whilst hee liueth, his body yeldeth noysome and odious things: and when hee dyeth hee becometh a lumpe of foule and vncleane corruption. During this lyfe his only care is to nourish and maintaine one, but when he is dead, he shall feede & sustayne a number of wormes.³

The thinking of Hamlet is not so different from this gloomy preaching of the church, but there is a difference in emphasis, and as we shall see later, perhaps in implication. To Hamlet this return to the dust was not just a matter of course, to be accepted intellectually but ignored emotionally; it was an intense and painfully vivid reality, the one stupendous certainty, throwing its shadows backward over the whole course of life and swallowing its hopes and achievements in the darkness of oblivion. The gravedigger sings as he throws up the skulls from the earth. His rude song is filled with the tragedy of life, but it penetrates no deeper

¹ *Hamlet*, IV, i, 22-23.

² St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, Sig. A., fol. iii.

³ Kerton, trans., *op. cit.*, Bk. III, chap. i.

than his throat, and he drinks and laughs and jests with no thought of the skulls or his trade. "Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?" asks Hamlet. Through Hamlet's daintier sense it is as if we saw death for the first time in its stark reality, stripped of sentimental romance and sham glory, and the consolations of religion and philosophy. And through the ugliness of death we see the vanity and hollowness of life.

In the grave there is no distinction between the good and the bad. The skull buried in sacred ground is thrown out with no more circumspection than if it were "Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder." The politician whose shrewdness would circumvent God, and the courtier who could out-flatter lords, come to the same end, "chapless, and knock'd about the mazzard with the sexton's spade." "Here's revolution," exclaims Hamlet, "if we had the trick to see 't. Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggats with 'em? mine ache to think on 't." No skill and tricks of the law, no deeds and conveyances of wealth can prevent the common end.

This fellow might be in 's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box, and must the inheritor himself have no more, ha?¹

Beauty and wit and power are equally helpless and frail before the corruption of death. Poor Yorick's infinite jests are still, and the flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar have frozen into the sickening grin of a skull, quite chop-fallen. The dust of the noble Alexander is worth no more than to plug beer barrels, and

Imperial Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Must stop a hole to keep the wind away.²

This is the end, the goal of human power and glory, of wealth, learning, and wit. The soul of Hamlet sickens at the thought. "Now, get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come: make her laugh at that."³

¹ *Hamlet*, V, i, 111-121.

² *Ibid.*, V, i, 235 f.

³ *Ibid.*, V, i, 212 ff.

With the vision of Death Hamlet sees the futility of life. Men rot in the earth in eight or nine years if they are not already rotten before burial, and even a man's life is no more than to say "one." Face to face with the degradation and the long oblivion of the grave, of what value is any human effort? All hopes of glory and power and achievement are swallowed up in the eternal silence of the tomb. Life itself is vain, and death the eternal fact.

VI

THE REST IS SILENCE

The philosophy of futility is a philosophy of pessimism. It is present in Job and Ecclesiastes, but the former closes with the spirit of reverent submission and the latter in the spirit of fideism, leaving a gulf between the doubt and the single affirmation of faith at the end. It is present in Innocent III and other religious writers, and notably in the Dance of Death tradition, but with a similar difference. These can point out the futility of human effort and the gruesomeness of death, because they possess a faith that lifts them above the tragedy of the grave. They are separate and apart from the despised flesh, and can glory from a distance over its suffering and degradation. But it is an open question as to how far-reaching Hamlet's pessimism may be. Is Shakespeare presenting merely the conventional religious idea, or must we understand a pessimism reaching even beyond the grave? The religious writer is careful to leave no doubt, but in *Hamlet* the question is more difficult.

The evidence may be briefly summarized. The ghost returns from the realm of the dead; and Hamlet speaks of his own "immortal" soul, uses the conventional ideas of purgatory and heaven, and in his soliloquy, as he sees the king at prayer, shows a belief in hell. All this is in harmony with a normal faith. On the other hand, this same soliloquy contains a strange inconsistency. Despite his father's statement of his doom, Hamlet says,

And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstances and course of thought,
'T is heavy with him.¹

The ghost's statement is as completely ignored as if it had never

¹ *Hamlet*, III, iv, 82-84.

been made, and Hamlet is merely using the popular surmise. A similar "inconsistency" has been pointed out, in his third soliloquy. With the ghost's appearance still in his mind, he refers to the grave as

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns.....¹

These inconsistencies, about which so much has been made, are capable of explanation, to be sure. But on the other hand, is it not possible that Shakespeare himself completely ignores the ghost as a living reality, using it merely as a necessary tool for the dramatic unfolding of the plot? In this sense it would be dramatically real to Hamlet, but at the same time would not be allowed to interfere with the empirical reality of his thought. And this need not be strange, for the ghost belonged to a realm outside the use of sense, and in contrast with the solid and tangible things of earth it is even unreal to Hamlet. While he says after its appearance,

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy,²

yet his own thinking is utterly uninfluenced by it. He is as empirical and free from supernatural domination as if no ghost had ever walked. He trusts his own experiment, the observation of his eyes, and the interpretation of his reason, above the revelation from another world. While he dramatically accepts the ghost, he rationally ignores it.

Just how much faith would be involved in references to hell and purgatory, and how much convention, would also be a question. But on the whole Hamlet's thinking on death is singularly hopeless. The third soliloquy is distinctly pagan in tone. He questions death and its possible sleep as if no Christian resurrection and hell had ever been preached. There is a Stoic consideration of suicide as an escape from the troubles of life, combined with the natural fear of dreams after death, but there is no more certainty of an existence beyond than any pagan might have felt. Even the Stoic contemplating death had to outface these natural fears. Lucretius says it is the fear of death inspired by poets' tales that make men endure the miseries of life:

¹ *Hamlet*, III, i, 79-80.

² *Ibid.*, I, v, 166-167.

But if it once appear
 That after death there's neither Hope nor Fear,
 Then men might freely triumph, then disdain
 The Poets tales, and scorn their fancied pain:
 But now we must submit, since pains we fear
 Eternal after death, we know not where.¹

Hence a major purpose in Epicureanism was to banish these fears and set men free by teaching the eternal sleep of death,

For as we neither knew, nor felt those harms,
 When dreadful *Carthage* frighted *Rome* with arms,

 So after Death, when we shall be no more,
 What tho the Seas forsake their usual Shore,
 And rise to Heaven? what the Stars drop from thence?
 Yet how can this disturb our perisht Sense?²

Philip de Mornay, in his *Six Excellent Treatises of Life and Death*, makes Socrates comfort Axiochus with the same philosophy with reference to the body. There will be no feeling after death for

...your body shall bee dissolved as it was before your conception. And, as you felt no kind of euill, in that time, when *Draco* and *Calisthenes* gouerned the Commonwealth (for, then you were not existent, to feele either good or euill) so after death your body shall be sensible of nothing, it being then free from the touch of any discommodities.³

But De Mornay is careful to explain that, though the body perish, the soul is immortal and lives on. In Hamlet's soliloquy, however, there is none of the Christian certainty of life after death; there is only the longing for eternal sleep balked by the fear of a further existence. In other words, Hamlet has neither the comfort of Epicurean atheism nor the certainty and consolation of Christian faith, but only a tormenting doubt that palsies resolution.

In the grave scene, however, the doubt has changed to something deeper, for the insistence on death as the end of all is lightened by no gleam of immortality. The lines,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
 To tell my story.⁴

¹ Lucretius, (Titus Lucretius Carus), *Lucretius, His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy*, done into English verse, with notes, by Thomas Creech. (3d. ed.; London, 1683), p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

³ Philip de Mornay, *Six Excellent Treatises of Life and Death* (London, 1607), Sig. A., fol. 5.

⁴ *Hamlet*, V, ii, 358 ff.

coming after this scene, and from the philosopher of Death, can suggest only the felicity of eternal sleep.

But especially significant is Shakespeare's change in Hamlet's last words. In the First Quarto the dying Hamlet prays "Heaven receive my soul." It was a conventional ending, fitting a man of faith and hopeful of the life beyond. It had the spirit of Ophelia's prayer, "God ha' mercy on his soul! And on all Christian souls, I pray God." But after the hopeless scenes by the grave and Hamlet's brooding over the oblivion of death, how profoundly suggestive is the substitution for this prayer of these strange, startling words—"the rest is silence"! In a single phrase, like an epitaph above his tomb, they crystalize his whole philosophy of Death, and suggest that profound negation at which his thought has finally arrived. After the struggle and pain of life, after its futile noise, "the rest is silence"!

But we must not make the mistake of confounding Hamlet's philosophy of pessimism and futility with Shakespeare's own thought. Our study has intentionally concentrated on Hamlet's broodings over the problem of evil and the form the world takes in the mirror of his mind. But in the play as a whole the intense pessimism is relieved by the doubts of optimism, and the gloom of Hamlet by the background of the court. Alongside the Prince is the Stoic confidence of Horatio. If "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," Horatio believes "Heaven will direct it," and to Hamlet's brooding over Alexander's dust, Horatio replies, "'T were to consider too curiously, to consider so."

Even Hamlet's own mind is not always consistent. There is a clear recognition of the Almighty who sets his canon against self-slaughter, and of a divinity that shapes our ends, along with his sense of futility and the oblivion of the grave. Hamlet is divided between faith and negation, and much of his bitter cynicism and pain is the result of this self-estrangement. In the struggle against blank negation, toward which the brooding on evil tends, he even questions his own senses, doubts his own doubts. For a time at least he accepts the doctrine of the skeptic that the criterion of good and evil is only in the mind, that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." As a pure skeptic he might escape

¹ *Hamlet* II, ii, 256 f. See also Hardin Craig, "Hamlet's Book," *Huntington Library Bulletin*, No. 6 (Nov. 1934), pp. 17-34 for a discussion of background material on this skeptic and Stoic doctrine.

the problem of evil entirely by doubting its existence. If there is no external fact of evil, but all is merely the reflex of our own thinking, then we can attain a peace of mind by doubting the evidence of the senses. This problem of the relativity of evil, however, does not belong to this study. It is sufficient here to point out that Hamlet finds little relief through doubt. If "thinking" makes it bad, Hamlet nevertheless thinks, and to him it is bad; if he accepts the skeptic dictum theoretically, he cannot follow it practically, for he cannot deny the evidence of his mind. Thus even the relief of skepticism fails.

So through a drama of powerful human emotions reacting to a fundamental and universal moral problem, Shakespeare has concentrated our attention upon this solitary black-robed figure as he struggles to understand the meaning of "this harsh world" in which he draws his breath in pain. Job, facing the same problem of suffering and loss, had, through the revelation of divine majesty, been so overwhelmed with the insignificance of human knowledge that he was conscience-stricken at questioning the ways of God toward man, and his faith rose to a sublime and transcendent loyalty. But Hamlet finds no certainty. For him every ambition has been thwarted. Love and friendship have turned to treachery and hate. In the tragic struggle his soul has become hardened and his despair has grown deeper, till, standing by the grave, he feels life to be futility and death a blank negation. But the gloom toward which his mind has traveled is lightened by moments of calm, even Stoic, faith, and the ultimate conclusion is not despair, but rather passionate, penetrating doubt.

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